

Speech by United States Ambassador to BiH Charles English
Circle 99 session
“Political situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina”
May 11, 2008

Thank you, Professor Repovac, for inviting me to the Circle 99 session. It is a true pleasure and an honor for me to address this group. Circle 99 has so many distinguished members, and it has consistently and courageously fought for a multinational, multi-religious and multi-cultural Bosnia and Herzegovina.

This is an important moment in the history of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In April, at the Bucharest Summit, Bosnia and Herzegovina was invited to begin an Intensified Dialogue with NATO. This was an important milestone in Bosnia's road to NATO membership. Not long afterwards, Bosnian parliamentarians adopted two police reform laws. We understand that many were dissatisfied by the police reform process, but what is most important is that passage of the laws opened the door for Bosnia to sign a Stabilization and Association Agreement with the European Union. This is a crucial step along Bosnia's road towards EU membership. With NATO's invitation to participate in an Intensified Dialogue and the signing of an SAA, Bosnia now has the opportunity to lock itself onto a path towards Euro-Atlantic integration.

Bosnia and Herzegovina has a true and steadfast partner in the United States. Over the past thirteen years and two administrations, despite pressing foreign policy challenges around the globe, the United States has maintained an active presence and an abiding interest in this country. The United States believes in the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina. We have unshakeable confidence that you want a multiethnic, democratic Bosnia inside Euro-Atlantic structures. That is the goal that guides my government, and our commitment to Bosnia and Herzegovina will not waver. We will continue to help build the institutions Bosnia and Herzegovina requires to secure a brighter future. Our commitment is to the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina with whom we share a vision of a country that is modern, safe and prosperous, a country that has abandoned the past divisions and tensions.

But this prosperous, democratic future inside the Trans-Atlantic community is not a guarantee. It must be built. It is something that you must create for yourselves. The opportunity offered to Bosnia by NATO and the EU must be seized by your country's political leaders. Their decisions will determine where Bosnia finds itself five, ten, or fifteen years from now. Will Bosnia be encircled by Europe? Will its neighbors move forward while Bosnia remains trapped in stagnation, or worse? The answers to these questions depend on whether your country's political leaders can focus on those issues that can bring the country together and that can move it forward.

This is an election year in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and one of the questions the voters should ask their political leaders is this: what are you doing to transform Bosnia into a modern, vibrant, and prosperous multiethnic democracy? I am afraid that thus far, the

honest answer has been “not much,” but this can change if the citizens of this country demand that their leaders change course. Bosnians should ask their politicians, not what they are doing for their narrow ethnic constituency, but what they are doing for all Bosnians and for the greater good.

The uncomfortable truth is that almost every advance along the road toward Euro-Atlantic integration has required sustained intervention by the international community. NATO’s Intensified Dialogue and the SAA are critical milestones in Bosnia’s Euro-Atlantic integration process. Political party leaders and elected officials should have been mindful of their responsibilities to build consensus -- for the good of the country -- in order to reach them. By law, *all* defense property issues should have been resolved by the end of 2006. The February 2008 Transfer Agreement on Moveable Defense Property was welcome, but it addressed only half the outstanding legal commitments associated with defense property. Party leaders signed a political agreement on police reform in 2005. Yet, passage of police reform legislation took another three years. If your political leaders were as committed to Euro-Atlantic integration as they claim, then the international activism required to secure these reforms should not have been necessary.

Republika Srpska’s political leadership often complains about the international community presence in Bosnia. It has criticized the international community for its role in the reform process. It has called for the closure of OHR and for “a new political beginning” in Bosnia based on “consensus.” Let me be clear: my government would like to see a reduced international presence in Bosnia and Herzegovina. We would like to see Bosnia’s political leaders engaged in constructive dialogue aimed at producing consensus. But how can my government conclude that the calls by Republika Srpska political leaders for a new political order based on consensus are sincere when those same leaders are calling Bosnia “an imposed state” and an “interest category” and when they are questioning Sarajevo’s status as the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Serb political leaders have asked whether Bosniak and Croat politicians are prepared to accept Republika Srpska. But equally, Bosniak and Croat politicians may ask Serb political leaders, in light of their rhetoric, whether they are prepared to accept Bosnia and Herzegovina.

I should not have to say this thirteen years after Dayton, but the rhetoric I hear makes clear that I need to: Bosnia and Herzegovina is a sovereign state. Its territorial integrity is settled. These facts are a function of international law and Bosnia’s constitution. Bosnia was recognized by the United Nations in 1992, and its territorial integrity was again affirmed and guaranteed by the Dayton Peace Agreement in 1995. My government will not tolerate internal or external challenges to Bosnia’s sovereignty or territorial integrity.

Some Bosniak political leaders welcome the international presence in Bosnia. Indeed, some have criticized the international community for not pressing forcefully enough for reforms. They have even urged the High Representative to make more liberal use of his Bonn Powers. My government supports the OHR’s role in Bosnia, and we think it still has a vital role to play. But criticisms that some Bosniak politicians have used the OHR as an instrument to avoid the hard work of making compromises and building consensus

are not without merit. Let me be clear: if Bosniak politicians choose to provoke crises rather than to embrace compromise, they will stand alone. If they refuse to accept Bosnia's constitutional order and choose instead to pursue politically-impossible dreams at the expense of tangible progress towards Euro-Atlantic integration, they cannot hope to enjoy the support of the international community.

The international community supported the creation of many of the state-level institutions that exist today in order to provide the institutional capacity required to implement the competencies provided to the state under Dayton. We could not expect the state to manage immigration, refugee and asylum policy without a Foreigners Affairs Service. Nor could the state regulate inter-entity transportation without a Ministry of Transport and Communications. These and other state-building reforms were not designed to punish Republika Srpska or the Serbs, as some Serb political leaders have suggested. Republika Srpska leaders regularly assert their commitment to Dayton, but making Dayton work means making state-level institutions work. Too often, the Republika Srpska leadership has sought to undermine state-level institutions. More recently, they have begun a campaign to roll back reforms and undermine Dayton, even though this is the only framework within which Republika Srpska can exist.

This is not to say that there have not been reforms that have gone beyond Dayton. The creation of a single Ministry of Defense and single, multiethnic armed forces is an obvious example. But does anyone in this country *genuinely* believe that Bosnia would have been better off maintaining three mono-ethnic militaries? I doubt it. These reforms were also a requirement for progressing down the path towards NATO membership. Euro-Atlantic integration will require additional reforms, including reforms that strengthen and build the state. Other reforms have been required as part of the European Partnership process, one of the steps towards European integration, which Republika Srpska leaders support. It is not anti-Serb for the international community to call for such reforms as part of the Euro-Atlantic integration process. Just ask the Poles, the Czechs, or the Bulgarians.

To say that more reforms are required, to say that Bosnia needs a functional and efficient state to secure its Euro-Atlantic future, is not to say that Bosnia must have, or even should have, a unitary state. Some Bosniak leaders believe that every reform requires the creation of a new state-level institution. Bosnia will never have the huge state-level apparatus found in some Western European countries. The Euro-Atlantic integration process is not a tool for Bosniak politicians who wish to establish a unitary state. Checks and balances, and a certain level of decentralized authority, are critical elements of the structures of governance necessary for Bosnia and Herzegovina. Repeated calls for the abolition of Republika Srpska are a distraction at best, if not a self-destructive dream, and they do nothing to facilitate Bosnia's Euro-Atlantic integration. Bosniak politicians would make better use of their time and energy, if they devoted themselves to ensuring that existing state-level institutions function efficiently and effectively and that further establishment of such institutions be firmly grounded in clear European accession requirements.

Bosnia is only at the beginning of its road to NATO and EU membership. Much more comprehensive reforms will be required, particularly as part of the EU accession process. Your political leadership faces the task of harmonizing its legislation with the EU *aquis communautaire*. This document contains 350,000 pages of rules and regulations and is increasing by 5,000 pages each year. In the first phase of SAA implementation alone, Bosnia must enact 1,159 regulations mandated by the *aquis*. It is sobering to note that last year the Council of Ministers approved only 38 of 118 pieces of legislation it considered. The state parliament adopted only 40 of 135 laws on its agenda. If Bosnia and Herzegovina is to have a realistic hope of joining NATO or the EU, its political leadership must work much, much harder. They cannot spend three years exchanging bitter polemics over each reform or devote their energies to narrow, ethnic agendas.

With the Intensified Dialogue just beginning and an SAA now ready to be signed, it is now time for the leaders of Bosnia and Herzegovina to make their choice: to seize this opportunity and advance toward NATO and Europe, or to fall far behind your neighbors. Bosnia is at a crossroads, and the paths are clearly defined. The path to Europe will be the politically more difficult path, to be sure, but it is the only path to a peaceful, prosperous future. If Bosnia's leaders choose their more foot worn, familiar, and traditional path, that is to say if they continue to use the reform process as a battleground for narrow ethnic agendas, no one, not the United States, nor the EU, nor any other international institution will be able to prevent them from betraying the hopes of Bosnia's citizens. Not a single Bosnian citizen, of any ethnicity or entity, benefited from the recent, wasteful cycle of artificial crises engineered by political leaders or the prolonged stalemate over police reform. Much time has been unnecessarily lost. Bosnia desperately needs statesmanship. The behavior of the last two years was completely inconsistent with that imperative.

That's why I think it is important for me to repeat messages that I have delivered in the past to political leadership of Bosnia and Herzegovina. These messages are of central importance to Bosnia's future.

For Serbs, you must accept that your future lies within Bosnia and Herzegovina. The separation of any part of this country is not only impractical, but unacceptable and dangerous. Rhetoric that even hints at it is destabilizing. Secession, under any circumstances, is not an option. We must be clear about one thing: there is no independent path for Republika Srpska, separate from Bosnia and Herzegovina, to accede into Euro-Atlantic structures.

Recent years have witnessed unprecedented growth and development in Republika Srpska. This development has convinced some that prosperity in Bosnia and Herzegovina is zero-sum -- that the success and strength of one part of the country must come at the expense of the state. Nothing could be further from the truth. Sustained prosperity and development can and must only be universal. Make no mistake, a prosperous and successful Republika Srpska can only exist as part of a strong and prosperous state of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

We know that at times the state is not always effective. But instead of seeking to undermine and weaken them, Serb leaders should seek to mend and reform state institutions to the benefit of all the citizens of this country. Serb leaders are not advancing Republika Srpska's interests by weakening the state. Serb leaders must also accept that more state-level reforms will be necessary to implement the SAA and secure the benefits for their constituents of membership in the Euro-Atlantic community.

Some Serb political leaders have suggested that opposition to Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic frees them from the burden of the past. These leaders are correct if what they mean is that they themselves and Bosnian Serbs generally are not collectively guilty for the heinous crimes orchestrated and planned by Republika Srpska's wartime leadership. But these leaders are wrong if what they mean is that the current Republika Srpska leadership does not have a responsibility to acknowledge the past and to take steps to address its awful legacy. Two genocides have occurred on European soil in the last 70 years, one of them was perpetrated in the name of Republika Srpska. That may be an uncomfortable fact for some, but it is a fact nonetheless, and it will never change.

For Bosniaks, you cannot allow the past to drive your political agenda or straightjacket your approach to reform. The legacy of the war years still hangs heavily over Bosnia, and it will continue to hang over your country for many years. This is unavoidable, and it is a tragedy. My government believes strongly that those who committed terrible crimes must be brought to justice. Moving forward does not mean forgetting; it does not diminish the legitimacy of past suffering or the importance of memory. It is reasonable to ask others to openly confront the past, but for Bosnia to move forward, you must also do your part to build trust.

The scope and scale of suffering endured by Bosniaks were greater than that endured by any other ethnic group during the break up of Yugoslavia, but that does not mean that Bosniak forces did not commit crimes, crimes that Bosniaks have a responsibility to acknowledge. Whether the mujahedeen came to Bosnia to help is immaterial; their units committed terrible crimes against Serb and Croat civilians. Are you building trust by defending them?

As the majority population, Bosniaks have perhaps the greatest responsibility for the country's future. To some that may seem unfair, but it is an inescapable political fact nonetheless. It is not enough for Bosniak leaders to talk about a strong, multiethnic Bosnia and Herzegovina. They must engage in the difficult work of forging consensus and making compromises necessary to make this vision a reality. Political leaders who promise it all, who promise the past can be rewritten, offer hollow promises. An all or nothing approach to negotiation will inevitably lead to nothing, or worse.

Bosniak leaders must also accept that the country needs checks and balances to protect the interests of all constituent peoples and minorities. Serb and Croat fears about outvoting are not illegitimate simply because some of those who have invoked them in the past have done so to advance illegitimate ends. Bosniak political leaders must examine their own their political conduct within governing institutions, particularly

where they are the majority, and ask themselves, is this conduct assuaging concerns among other ethnic groups about domination or contributing to it? If the latter, as appears to have been the case during the recent debate within the Federation over revenue allocation, then they must mend their ways or accept the consequences for driving potential partners further away from what should be a shared vision for Bosnia's future.

Finally, Bosniak political leaders have a responsibility to make state-level institutions work, since their effectiveness is critical to the country's Euro-Atlantic integration. It is irresponsible to politicize state-level institutions or to put narrow ethnic interests ahead of broader state interests when managing them. If Bosniaks do not do their part to make state-level institutions work, how can they expect Serbs and Croats to do so?

For Croats, you must accept that further ethnic division of this already divided country can never happen. Your diagnosis of many of the problems confronting Bosnia has merit. My government shares your view that the Bosnian state must be strengthened, that without a basic level of autonomy and credibility the state cannot drive the Euro-Atlantic integration process, as it must. That is why my government has supported and continues to support constitutional reform. We recognize that Croats are unhappy with current constitutional arrangements. Unfortunately, competing proposals that focus on Bosnia's internal boundaries and territorial organization have fueled ethnic divisions. They have distracted from the discussion that must take place about providing the state with structures functional and efficient enough to meet Bosnia's Euro-Atlantic obligations.

As I said at the beginning of my remarks, the United States believes in Bosnia and the people of Bosnia. We believe that this country's citizens deserve the peaceful, prosperous future inside Euro-Atlantic structures that they are asking their political leaders to secure for them. Bosnia has taken a step closer to Euro-Atlantic structures, but the responsibilities of Bosnia's leaders have now become correspondingly greater. Decades in the future, historians will look back at how Bosnia was transformed from a post-conflict society divided by ethnic fault lines into a vibrant, prosperous multiethnic European state. In doing so they will identify a turning point at which Bosnia's political leaders recognized their shared destiny and seized a moment that made this outcome possible. As I did three weeks ago at the University of Sarajevo, I again appeal to all, elected officials, political leaders, and citizens to let that moment be now.